Commencement Address August 28, 2011 David O. Frantz

Members of the Board of Trustees, President Gee, honorees, administrative leaders, fellow faculty, parents, guests, and above all, members of this graduating class. First, let me congratulate you on arriving at this place today – literally – could the campus streets and parking be any more complicated than they have been this summer quarter??! Finding your way, literally, has been a major challenge.

And second, let me congratulate you for arriving at this milestone today; obviously early on in your time at OSU all of you here today heeded Dean Wormer's advice to Flounder in *Animal House*; "fat drunk and stupid is no to go through life." So kudos to all of you for having made it to commencement. No seven years of college down the drain for you.

It is a great honor for me to be with you today, and to have been chosen to give this address. You would think that after having sat

through something like 40 to 50 commencement addresses here at the University, chiefly as Secretary of the Board of Trustees, where my duties were simply to hood the honorary degree recipients and where my only worry was the height of such recipients and the hope that I would not garrote them as I invested them with the honorary hood, you would think that two things would be no brainers: that I would not be nervous, and that I would have plenty of material from which to draw for my talk. Truth to tell, however, I am a bit nervous, although let's face it, I am not as nervous as the folks sitting behind me here, since they know my research specialty lies in the area of Renaissance erotica, and I am sure they are worried that I might actually talk about it during this address, titling it something like "How the study of Renaissance erotica can lead to a meaningful, fulfilling life," then maybe showing some exquisite visual examples of classy Renaissance erotica, and sending you forth. Were I to do this, I might have a chance of giving one of the few commencement addresses ever remembered. But even I didn't think that would be entirely appropriate. The era

I study, the Renaissance, was mightily concerned with decorum, and somehow such a presentation didn't seem quite right for this occasion.

So that left me with anxiety about what to say. I am particularly conscious of this issue, because, I must confess that those commencement addresses I sat through all kind of roll together, and I would be hard pressed to give the nuggets, the best of, those many speeches. And then I have very much in mind the headline from an article written this Spring around commencement time by New York Times columnist David Brooks which read: "Graduation advice seldom is of any use." And if I am really being honest about this, if we think about commencement, as we should, as a beginning, not a culmination, the beginning of your going forth into the "real world," what could I possibly have to say about that? I've never been there! I never left college. After all, I went from college, to graduate school, to teaching at Ohio State, hardly credentials for sending you forth "into the real world."

I do know this much. The key component of the address is to be short; and I can do short, after all, I AM short. And while one of my greatest fantasies as I contemplate this venue, the Schottenstein arena, is that I would take trustee Clark Kellogg down there on the floor and post him up, Coach Thad Matta assures me that the only guy I could actually do that to is the one sitting behind me with glasses thicker than mine, wearing the bow tie!

In my quest for a theme here, I did what you would expect any professor to do, I fell back on research in preparing these few comments. Over the past several weeks I have reread and seen, thanks to OSU's partnership with the Royal Shakespeare Company of England, five Shakespearean plays, and rewatched that most important movie of college life of the past forty years, *Animal House*.

You would think the easiest thing to do for someone who has spent a lifetime teaching Shakespeare, would be simply to give you

the best of Shakespeare, some of his most profound admonitory saws. You know:

… my blessing with thee!

And these few precepts in thy memory

Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue

Yadda yadda yadda

Neither a borrower nor a lender be,

Yadda yadda yadda

This above all: to thine own self be true.

The problem is, of course, that almost all of the speeches like this in Shakespeare are delivered by characters like Polonius, in *Hamlet*, a bumbling blowhard, who gives this advice to his son but then sends spies to Paris to report on what he is up to, and later, hiding behind a curtain to see what Prince Hamlet is up to with his mother, manages to get himself killed in the process. So that won't work. Not a man whose advice you would choose to follow. Nor would the title character, Hamlet himself, be anyone you would want to emulate. His problems are many of course, not the least

of which is the fact that he has been off at the University, where he has gained a lot of book knowledge and apparently wasted a lot of time going to plays. This seems not to be good training for being a Prince, or at least one called upon to carry out an act of vengeance. This most agonizing thinker of all of Shakespeare's characters can do virtually nothing but think, and when he is prompted to action by his father's Ghost, he exclaims that he can act only by wiping out "all trivial fond records,/ All saws of books." So much for having been at the University! That would hardly be advice I should be giving.

A colleague suggested a simple solution to the "advice dilemma" of the commencement address. She said, "Just tell them to be nice and sit down." Not bad. Be nice is a very good place to start. That admonition really is a contemporary version of something that the Renaissance held dear, civility. The Renaissance, that first great age of printing, inundated readers with books and manuals about civility, how we interact with one and other, At the heart of these interactions lie notions of discourse – speaking and writing,

that are the means of these interactions, and which, I would submit are more important today than ever. In an era in which we are literally assaulted by much blather and ranting, where unsubstantiated opinion, expressed ever more loudly, seems the coin of the realm, we need to recover the use of civility. Not that there will or should be lack of controversy or disagreement: John Milton in *Areopagitica,* his defense of freedom press, said it well in 1644, "Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making." A key component in this discourse is the desire to learn; not to be hardened in our opinions, but to be open to different arguments, different perspectives and to be moved by evidence, not noise. As a democratic society it is in our self interest to engage in civil discourse if we are to continue as a vibrant and free society. So, Be nice . Let's add just a few others, and then I'll sit down.

Besides Dean Wormer's advice to Flounder, there is something else that *Animal House* got right-- " Knowledge is good" -- the

motto of Faber College. We are inundated with data; it is at our fingertips instantaneously, even a retrograde Luddite like me knows how to access information in an instant on my iphone, and we can share ideas and thoughts and opinions and pictures -- probably what most of you out there are doing right now (and not a few of the folks sitting behind me), but none of that is knowledge. Knowledge comes from open inquiry, testing of theories, seeking evidence and it comes as well from the kind of discourse Milton was describing. So let's see, be nice, seek knowledge. And oh yes, maybe the key thing *Animal House* teaches us, reminds us of, is that laughter is good; it is especially good when we can laugh at ourselves.

While I like to claim that I haven't read much that was written after 1644, an author named Geoffrey Wolff, who has taught at OSU as a visiting writer, has a wonderful phrase in his book of essays called *A Day at the Beach*, that came from his first job as a writer of obituaries for the *Washington Post,* "Ambition is ubiquitous, purpose rare." Be a person of purpose. And to that, let

me add one other saw from our contemporary world, Pete Carril, longtime basketball coach at Princeton University, in his book *The Smart Take from the Strong,"* wrote, "The most important thing that you can do is to DO what you are doing well…. Focus on what you are doing when you are doing it." You are the greatest generation of multi-taskers ever, and no doubt there is much in our lives these days that needs that capacity. But I would suggest that it comes at an enormous price, for in that multi-tasking we skim over many things and eschew the pleasure that comes from the depth of any inquiry, any experience fully savored. So, be nice, seek knowledge, laugh, have purpose, Do what you do while you are doing it.

At the end here, let me return, if only for a moment to Shakespeare. Shakespeare's plays have endured through the ages because of his incomparable capacity to deal with the most fundamental of human issues, whether at the individual or societal level. His plays engage us in contemplation about the human condition, whether it be the qualities it takes to govern, the

limitations of free will, mankind's capacity for evil, the qualities required to be a good mother or father or daughter or son; I could go on and on with this list. But there are two lessons that I find of particular significance with which I would like to conclude.

In my years of teaching Shakespeare I have increasingly come to understand his insistence on two things: to his plays as play and to his insistence that we give attention to feeling.

Shakespeare is nothing if not metadramatic in his plays. With his use of plays within plays, his use of disguises and characters playing roles within roles, and with direct verbal cues that abound in virtually everyone of his plays, he reminds that we are watching a play. He reminds us that what we are seeing (or reading) is not "real," it is play. His art requires imagination, a willing suspension of disbelief. Explain the bare stage. Here we are on the coast of Bohemia, or I will be invisible. We are reminded, again and again that a dramatist, a human being, is employing the powers of art. For Shakespeare, as for his age, being artful was a key characteristic, a most telling way of delineating oneself as human.

His art requires that we use and appreciate imagination. It is requireds of those who create as well as of those who participate, whether as actors or spectators or listeners or readers. As Michael Boyd, artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company said in a workshop in New York City recently, Shakespeare presents us with a morally ordered world but one in which, from a director's or actor's, or viewer's or reader's point of view, there is much room for play. For the great "what if;" what if we do it this way, what if we read it this way? As Touchstone, one of Shakespeare's wisest of Fools points out, "much virtue in if." So, the possibility of play.

Finally, in that most powerful and greatest of his tragedies, *King Lear*, he presents us with the most moving spectacle of a king who must be reduced to "nothing" to learn what it means to be human, and thus what it might mean to be a true father, and a king and a fool. The education of Lear comes at an enormous cost to individuals and a kingdom, but there is education. And at the end of that tragedy Edgar, who is to take over as king, a tortured individual who reduced himself to a disguise as a naked mad man,

a poor bare forked animal, who has gone through the trials and tribulations with Lear out on the wild heath in a pelting storm and learned, as Lear learned, what it means to be human at the basest level, Edgar gets the final speech in which he says:

The weight of this sad time we must obey;

Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.

Acknowledging our feelings, and giving expression to those feelings is not something we tend to advocate in the academy, but I would submit that it is as critical a faculty in the human condition as any other. I hope that today, in the midst of this formal, civic, ceremonial function, you allow yourselves to enjoy the full range of feelings that I know must be yours: pride and joy, anticipation of what is to come, and perhaps a bit of sadness, already a sense of nostalgia for that part of your life that you are now about to leave behind.

Education is what you have been about here, and I would remind you in my most pedantic way that education, from the Latin educere, means "a leading out of," not a pouring into. So if we have done anything right here, this commencement is truly a beginning.

Be nice, seek knowledge, laugh, have purpose, Do what you do while you're doing it, make room for play, and give expression to your feelings. May you strive to enrich your lives and those of others with these qualities, and may the words of your alma mater ever resonate with the most powerful feelings for you, as they do for me after forty plus years of being part this noble enterprise we call Ohio State University: "how firm thy friendship, Ohio."

Again, heartiest congratulations. Thank you for letting me share this day with you.